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ABSTRACT

Ronald Reagan's rhetorical presidency can be summarized as a leader attempting, at virtually every occasion, to stem the dissolution of the American spirit by celebrating the country's mythic past. Such attempts were Reagan's celebration of nationalism through a particular discussion of the interrelationships between liberty, freedom, democracy, and Providence. Such efforts reveal Reagan's celebration of his own understanding of the country's civil religion. The relationship between the presidency and civil religion is an important one, where the elected official becomes the vehicle for articulating and preserving America's particular mythic understanding of itself. Reagan's presidential discourse was filled with examples of civil religion, such as discussion of sacred origins and sacred destinies for America, his recounting the deeds of heroic figures, and his definition of democracy. Other presidents have paid homage to that fusion of nationalism and mythology called America's civil religion. However, Reagan's rhetoric concerning civil religion is important for two reasons. First, Reagan was a president who used the elements of civil religion often; they permeated his rhetoric. Second, such epideictic celebrations were not without pragmatic implications, for such rhetoric ran through virtually all of the president's discourse. Ronald Reagan made very consistent and apparently very successful use of various elements of America's civil religion, reminding the people of their "divine legacy" and calling the people to fulfill their "divine destiny." (Thirty-four notes are included.) (MS)

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Ronald Reagan's Civil Religion

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In the latter moments of his farewell address to the nation, Ronald Reagan voiced a concern for his audience and his nation, "I'm warning of an eradication of the American memory that could result, ultimately, in an erosion of the American spirit."[1] Such a passage might easily summarize Reagan's rhetorical presidency, that of a leader attempting, at virtually every occasion, to stem the dissolution of the American spirit by celebrating the country's mythic past. Such attempts were Reagan's celebration of nationalism through a particular discussion of the interrelationships between liberty, freedom, democracy, and Providence. Such efforts reveal Reagan's celebration of his own understanding of the country's civil religion.[2]

This essay explores Reagan's use of civil religion in his most epideictic discourse.[3] This exploration unfolds into three major sections: a discussion of the basic tenets of civil religion and their particular relationship to the presidency, an analysis of Reagan's civil religion themes, and a conclusion suggesting wider application of these ideas.

CIVIL RELIGION AND THE PRESIDENCY

In his seminal essay on the subject, Robert Bellah suggested that a civil religion is the "set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals" that define a country's ethos.[4] Distinctive from any denominational forces, America's civil religion celebrates a mythic interpretation of the country's origins, heroic figures, and ultimate destiny. For Will Herberg, civil religion for the United States is best understood as "the American Way of Life", a condition where "national life is apotheosized, national values are religionized, national heroes are divinized, [and] national history is experienced as a . .

. redemptive history." [5] Scholars are often at odds as to precisely what civil religion, although the key elements, in broad sketches, are recurrent in the literature. Briefly, America's civil religion is the celebration of a particular sacred past, the narrative of which contains accounts of destined individuals, and foretells a special destiny for the country, provided its inhabitants remain faithful to their legacy. Threads of the rhetorical tapestry for America's civil religion reveal the Pilgrims' insistence that America was to be "God's New Israel" and a "shining city upon a hill" for future generations. Other threads reveal an American devotion to their democratic form of government as "the last best hope of mankind." This mythic story of America suggests that a Divine Providence was actively instrumental in the formation of the country, blessed it with freedom and liberty, and sanctified it apart from all other countries. The heroic figures in this narrative are not surprising: the Founding Fathers such as Washington and Jefferson; Lincoln who held the mystic chords of Union together in its greatest trial; the unnamed and unknown pioneers who carried the blessings of freedom westward.

In sum, equating civil religion with nationalism is too simplistic to understand properly the complexities of this force in American culture. Civil religion is nationalism intensified, legitimized, and internalized for the country. Civil religion is a mythic narrative of origins, explanations, rationales, and conclusions.

What is the relationship between the presidency and civil religion? Bellah begins his essay on the subject by referring to John F. Kennedy's inaugural and suggests, "The inauguration of a president is an important ceremonial event in this religion. It reaffirms, among other things, the religious legitimation of the highest political authority."[6] Most scholars

agree; the clearest examples of civil religion involve the rituals surrounding the highest elected office in the land. Most examples of civil religion emerge when a president is celebrating some important national ceremony, such as an inaugural address, the dedication of a battlefield, or Fourth of July activies. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is an excellent example of both a definition and celebration of the American spirit. Campbell and Jamieson suggest that the requirements for a properly constructed inaugural address will likely contain elements of civil religion.[7]

The president is a High Priest of America's civil religion, and a substantial amount of his discourse is given over to the epideictic genre. Epideictic rhetoric is most appropriate at ritualistic events and, according to Chaim Perelman, highlights cultural values worthy of emulation.[8] Epideictic discourse allows a president to reflect on the sacred origins and mythic events which characterize America. As I have contended elsewhere, these discourses are particularly prevelant in inagurual addresses.[9]

The relationship between the presidency and civil religion is an important one, where the elected official becomes the vehicle for articulating and preserving America's particular mythic understanding of itself.

RONALD REAGAN'S CIVIL RELIGION

No president since Franklin D. Roosevelt celebrated America's civil religion with the fervor of Ronald Reagan. He was more than a High Priest of the religion; he was its most vocal evangelist. Reagan's presidential discourse was filled with examples of civil religion; his rhetoric appeared to be one lengthy, unbroken tapestry of American heroic figures and deeds. Reagan consistently used some of the most obvious elements of civil religion;

one of favorite passages was the reference to the Pilgrims and "the shining city upon a hill." Reagan was insistent in his use of various heroic individuals, often including them in speeches beyond the pale of ceremony, such as the State of the Union.[10] He was at his best, however, with obviously ceremonial occasions where his discussions of America's mythic past and divine role were most readily accepted. Without question, Reagan was the best presidential participant in epideictic events and discourse since Kennedy. In his autobiography of Reagan, Lou Cannon suggests that Reagan's small-town, Midwest origins helped foster his sincere belief in the civil religion he was later to articulate so effectively.[11]

It would be grossly naive to think that Reagan himself wrote all of his passages concerning civil religion. But it would be unwise not to examine his discourse for the ways in which he, as speaker, discussed the concept of civil religion. This section of the essay, therefore, examines some of Reagan's use of civil religion. This essay does not hope to discuss ALL of Reagan's discourse on the topic. A careful reader of Reagan's presidential rhetoric will find references to civil religion in much, if not most, of his discourse. This essay instead focuses specifically on those most ceremonial occasions of Reagan's presidency, where his use of civil religion was most expected and most obvious. These examples are, however, representative of Reagan's larger universe of discourse. This analysis explores three aspects of Reagan's civil religion: his discussion of sacred origins and sacred destinies for America; his recounts of heroic figures; and his definition of democracy.

Sacred Origins and Sacred Destinies

In the very first moment of his presidency, in the opening passage of his First Inaugural, Reagan noted that the origins of an orderly transfer of power was "nothing less than a miracle."[12] The term is a recurrent one in Reagan's rhetoric. In his Farewell Address, eight years later, he would comment on "the American miracle"[13] and its impact on other world leaders. For Reagan, the origins of the country and its liberty and freedom were indeed miracluous and divinely inspired. In his Second Inaugural, he suggested

> We raise our voices to the God who is the Author of this most tender music [of freedom]. And may He continue to hold us close as we fill the world with our sound . . . one people under God, dedicated to the dream of freedom that He has placed in the human heart, called upon now to pass that dream on to a waiting and hopeful world.[14]

For Reagan, the origins of the country naturally lead to its destiny. According to the president, God called America to be "the last and greatest bastion of freedom," a place for the "last best hope" of liberty, and a "blessed land." From such divine origins, America has as its destiny an evangelical obligation to share these blessings with the rest of the world. Using a metaphor which he repeatedly relies upon, Reagan suggested in his First Inaugural that such a destiny will make America "the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom."[15] In his Farewell Address, he closed his Administration with a strong reference to this unique American destiny:

> [A]fter 200 years, two centuries, [America] still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what storm. And she's still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims, from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.[16]

In summary, Reagan was quite clear about the sacred origins of the country. He strongly suggested that such origins demanded a unique destiny: that of evangelizing the rest of the world to the benefits of freedom. Ultimately for Reagan, America was a divinely provided sanctuary for those early Pilgrims and America must serve as a continuing sanctuary for freedom-seekers in the late 20th century. To do less would be to deny the country's origins and destiny.

Heroic Figures

Cannon noted of Reagan that even "[h]is heroes had always been heroes" and that by Reagan's own admission, he was "a sucker for hero worship."[17] Indeed, by the end of his presidency, it was often difficult to separate Reagan-the-actor from the individuals he portrayed. By 1989, Reagan had become the Gipper. An important aspect of civil religion are the heroic figures which serve as saints in the theology of Americanism. No people, as Stephen Ausband noted, are very comfortable without legendary figures who battle and eventually overcome some form of evil and chaos.[18] These heroes are at the very center of any mythological system, including civil religion; myths are narratives of great deeds accomplished by men and women, told with some ultimate end for the audience's benefit. These figures, held sacred by a

culture, help define a group's understanding of itself. As Clifford Geertz noted, these figures function "to synthesize a people's ethos . . . the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order."[19] Heroic figures transcend contemporary times and problems and serve as exemplars for maintaining faith in the civil religion.

For Reagan, the office of Chief Executive became the office of Chief Mythmaker. His discourse overflowed with accounts of heroic individuals, heroic actions, and heroic events. With his discussion of these figures, Reagan was able to atriculate strongly one of the key elements of civil religion as well as link his discourse to very powerful cultural enthymemes. The heart of the First Inaugural was Reagan's declaration that Americans "have every right to dream heroic dreams. Those who say that we're in a time when there are no heroes, they just don't know where to look."[20] The new president then pointed his listeners toward such places as the factory, the farm, the lunch counter, concluding "[t]heir values sustain our national life."[21] Reagan made effective use of a variety of heroic figures in his discourse, often placing these people in the gallery for his State of the Union addresses and then recounting their deeds near the conclusions of his speeches.[22] He was also fond of describing anonymous, "common folk Americans" as heroes. In his Second Inaugural, for example, Reagan observed that the most important goal for Americans was "to be heroes who heal our sick, feed the hungry, protect peace among nations, and leave this world a better place."[23]

The First Inaugural was practically a roll call of legendary Amreican figures. He mentioned Dr. Joseph Warren, president of the Massachusetts Congress, a "man who might have been one of the greatest among the Founding Fathers." Reagan also directed the audience's attention to three key figures

in American mythology: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. Washington he described as a "man of humilty who came to greatness reluctantly. He led America out of revolutionary victory into infant nationhood." Of Jefferson, he noted, "The Declaration of Independence flames with his eloquence." And finally, "Whoever would understand in his heart the meaning of America will find it in the life of Abraham Lincoln." As he mentioned each of these latter trio, he pointed his audience toward each of their respective monuments, "shrines to the giants on whose shoulders we stand."[24] In the Second Inaugural, Reagan returned again to Washington and Jefferson as well as John Adams, persons "who dared to think they could start the world over again."[25]

In his remarks at the opening ceremonies of the Statue of Liberty Centennial, Reagan made use of Lincoln, the Pilgrims, and Harry Truman, all within the first few moments of his speech.[26] At the memorial service for the Challenger astronauts, Reagan again quoted Lincoln on America as "the last, best hope of man on Earth . . . built on heroism and noble sacrifice." He chose as well to discuss frontier pioneers and not unexpectedly linked these historical figures to seven astronauts. In his nationally broadcast eulogy for the Challenger, he began by noting "We mourn seven heroes...."[27]

In sum, Reagan made consistent and unabashed use of heroic figures; his discourse as president was a rhetoric of heroism. Many of these figures were national saints for America's civil religion, particularly Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. Reagan repeatedly returns to this trio; scholars agree that in the panthenon of American saints, these three are likely the strongest. They are America's archangels. Reagan's use of heroic figures served several purposes. These heroes, especially the national saints,

reminded the audience of the origins of the country, thus reinforcing another aspect of America's civil religion. These heroes, especially the more recent and more common ones, represented America's destiny. Finally, these figures were useful for highlighting important cultural values, such as sacrifice and duty, which Reagan could mobilize for his immediate political needs.

Democracy

A final aspect of Reagan's civil religion defined democracy and its corollary condition of freedom. Both of these twin concepts naturally are vital to America's mythology. Reagan offered both as foundations of America's ethos. He also described them as possessing supernatural tendencies, a set of mystic values for his audiences to worship and preserve. For example, in his comments at the anniversary of D-Day in Normandy, France, Reagan noted that some values are worth the ultimate sacrifice: "One's country is worth dying for, and democracy is worth dying for, because it's the most deeply honorable form of government ever devised by man."[28] The origins of democracy, however, are supernatural. He noted at the same event: "Something else helped the men of D-day: their rockhard belief that Providence would have a great hand in the events that would unfold here; that God was an ally in this great cause."[29]

Such a supernatural condition as freedom is a powerful weapon. As he noted in his First Inaugural, "Above all, we must realize that no arsenal or no weapon in the arsenals of the world is so formidable as the will and moral courage of free men and women. It is a weapon our adversaries in today's world do not have. It is a weapon that we as Americans do have."[30] Freedom, for Reagan, must be protected and preserved so that other countries can

benefit from this supernatural power. In his Second Inaugural, Reagan suggested that "Freedom is one of the deepest and noblest aspirations of the human spirit.... America must remain freedom's staunchest friend, for freedom is our best ally and it is the world's only hope to conquer poverty and preserve peace." After all, Reagan noted in the same address, "we are all Americans, pledged to carry on this last, best hope of man on Earth."[31] Freedom and democracy were not only inherently good for Reagan, they were also practical, creating an interesting fusion of American civil religion with American pragmatism. In his Farewell Address, Reagan said

> Countries across the globe are turning to free markets and free speech and turning away from the ideologies of the past. For the great rediscovery of the 1980s had been that, lo and behold, the moral way of government is the practical way of government: Democracy, the profoundly good, is also the profoundly productive.[32]

Even in his eulogy of the Challenger astronauts, Reagan found a way to celebrate freedom, suggesting that America did not cover up its mistakes, "We do it all up front and in public. That's the way freedom is, and we wouldn't change it for a minute."[33]

Reagan made frequent use of the concepts of freedom and democracy, which would not be particularly unusual for a presidential rhetor, especially one who built his rhetoric on a mythology of the country. These conditions of freedom and democratic government are perhaps the most ultimate of terms for Americans. What made them especially important in Reagan's civil religion rhetoric were the ways in which he attributed supernatural origins and power to these terms. These concepts, which are critical to the country's self-

definition, were not just political conditions. They were not merely an American thesis to the Soviet's anithesis of communism. Rather, for Reagan, freedom and democracy were far more powerful and good than any other existing political structure. What John Winthrop saw as a "shining city upon a hill" came full circle with Reagan's explanation of the attractive and redemptive power of freedom. Because of its freedom, America could not only save itself, but those around it. Indeed, for Reagan, America had an obligation both to protect this sacred fire of liberty and to share it with the rest of the world.

CONCLUSIONS

Other presidents have paid homage to that fusion of nationalism and mythology called America's civil religion. George Washington, whom Reagan referred to so often, acknowledged this condition in his First Inaugural.[34] Reagan was certainly not the first, nor will he be the last, president to articulate those mythically-endowed principles which help this country define its origin and mission. However, Reagan's rhetoric concerning civil religion is important for study for two main reasons. First, Reagan was a president who used the elements of civil religion often. They permeated his rhetoric; his discourse was often saturated with references to mythic origins, destinies, heroic figures, and divinely-inspired freedom. Despite such heavy, and often heavy-handed use, Reagan's discussion of civil religion continued to appeal to his listeners. Perhaps one way of understanding the popularity of Reagan is to examine his recurrent use of civil religion. For a country emerging from Viet Nam, Watergate, and the Iranian hostage crisis, Reagan's rhetoric obviously struck very responsive chords. He redefined the American

mission using figures and ideas which were long a part of the cultural psyche. Reagan is an important rhetor for study because he so clearly, and I would argue, successfully, articulated America's civil religion during his two terms as president.

Second, such epideictic celebrations were not without pragmatic implications. This study focused on Reagan's discussion of civil religion in what were obviously ceremonial occasions. Such rhetoric, however, ran through virtually all of the president's discourse. For example, the elements of origin, destiny, heroes, and freedom discussed in this paper were also used by Reagan in his State of the Union messages. These speeches, by their nature, were far more deliberative and policy-setting. But Reagan mixed elements of ceremonial rhetoric and aspects of civil religion into these "non-ceremonial" occasions. Such a combination of policy and mythology well may have empowered Reagan's presidency, and especially in its early days, helped garner him political successes with his administration's agenda. Certainly, this relationship between Reagan's epideictic celebrations and his seemingly deliberative discourse deserves further study.

In summary, Ronald Reagan made very consistent and apparently very successful use of various elements of America's civil religion. Perhaps as no president before him, Reagan served as the country's High Priest and Chief Mythmaker, reminding the people of their divine legacy and calling the people to fulfill their divine destiny.

1. Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, 25 (16 January 1989): 56. Herafter referred to as Farewell.

2. There are a variety of essays, monographs, and books on the subject of America's civil religion. For a representative survey, the following works are most useful: Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," Daedalus (Winter 1967): 1-21; Robert N. Bellah, The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial (New York: Seabury, 1975); Michael W. Hughey, Civil Religion and Moral Order (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983); Robert S. Michaelsen, The American Search For Soul (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1975); and Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., American Civil Religion (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

3. In his addition to his Farewell Address cited above, other speeches examined for this study were: "First Inaugural," Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 17 (26 January 1981): 1-5; "Second Inaugural," Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 21 (28 January 1985): 67-70; "Anniversary of D-Day," Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 20 (11 June 1984): 840-846; "Memorial to the Challenger," Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 22 (3 February 1986): 104-105, 117-119; and "Statue of Liberty Centennial," Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 22 (14 July 1986): 907-914).

4. Bellah, Daedalus 4.

5. Will Herberg, "America's Civil Religion: What It Is and Whence It Comes," in Richey and Jones, 78.

6. Bellah, Daedalus 4.

7. This is implied in their discussion of the genre of inaugural addresses. See Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Inaugurating the Presidency," Presidential Studies Quarterly 15 (Spring 1985): 394-411. For other discussions of presidential discourse, especially the inaugural address, see Edward W. Chester, "Shadow or Substance?: Critiquing Reagan's Inaugural Address," Presidential Studies Quarterly 11 (Spring 1981): 172-176; and Edward W. Chester, "Beyond the Rhetoric: A New Look At Presidential Inaugural Addresses," Presidential Studies Quarterly 10 (Fall 1980): 571-587.

8. The discussion of the genre of epideictic can be traced back as far as Aristotle; Perelman, however, offered fresh insights into the genre which are now widely accepted. See Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, The New Rhetoric (1959; Notre Dame: UP, 1969) 51.

9. Hal W. Fulmer, "A Rhetoric of Oldspeak: Mythic Elements in Presidential Inaugural Addresses, 1960-1980," Rhetoric Society Quarterly 16 (Fall 1986): 299-312.

10. For a discussion of Reagan's use of heroic figures, see Hal W. Fulmer, "Ronald Reagan and a Rhetoric of Heroic Potential and Sacred Values," The Speech Communication Annual 1 (1987): 33-46.

11. Lou Cannon, Reagan (New York: Perigee, 1982) 22-32.

12. First Inaugural 1.

13. Farewell Address 54.

14. Second Inaugural 70.

15. First Inaugural 4.

16. Farewell Address 57.

17. Cannon 18.

18. Stephen C. Ausband, Myth and Meaning, Myth and Order (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1983) 115.

19. The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Harper, 1973) 89.

20. First Inaugural 3.

21. First Inaugural 4.

22. Fulmer, "Heroic Potential."

23. Second Inaugural 68.

24. First Inaugural 5.

25. Second Inaugural 68.

26. Statue 907-908.

27. Challenger 104.

28. D-Day 841.

29. D-Day 841.

30. First Inaugural 4.

31. Second Inaugural 69.

32. Farewell Address 54-55.

33. Challenger 104.

34. Bellah, Daedalus 19.